

This is the accepted version of a forthcoming chapter due for publication in 2018 in Skeates, Robin and Day, Jo, (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Sensory Archaeology*. Abingdon; New York: Routledge

Accepted version downloaded from SOAS Research Online:  
<http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/24200/>

## Haptic Vision: Making Surface Sense of Islamic Material Culture

Simon O'Meara

(Draft chapter for *The Routledge Handbook of Sensory Archaeology*, ed. R. Skeates and J. Day)

*Few have ever denied that Islamic art was concerned with surface decoration.*  
 Oleg Grabar, What Makes Islamic Art Islamic?

It could be that archaeology is fundamentally ill equipped to recover the Islamic sensorium of times past. If its verb and site is, dig, what can it make of data that speaks only of the surface, that eschews depth? This contribution to the *Handbook* argues that much of early to premodern Islamic material culture makes a virtue of superficiality: hiding nothing but rendering interiority as folded exteriority. Even in a three-dimensional environment, a medina, say, there is no there there: no innermost core, no journey's end. The architecture, rather, is just so many folds of a wall; an origami art. The contribution additionally proposes that this visual phenomenon is related to the fact that in Islamic culture, vision is normatively configured as a sense more haptic than optical. Sight touches: glances. It does not see through; that is the prerogative of God, rulers, and mystics, and one of the joys of Paradise.<sup>1</sup>

### Hapticity and Islamic Ornament

*[S]eeing requires close-range vision and a haptic eye, since architecture deliberately occurs at the surface, not somewhere beyond it.*  
 Yahya Islami, What is Surficial Thought in Architecture?

Although it is correct to describe the frequently extensive use of ornament on objects and buildings of Islamic material culture in terms of drapes, mantles, sheaths, and other covers, to do so is to see the ornament but not to engage with it.<sup>2</sup> For whilst Islamic ornament does indeed often clothe an object or building, and thus – to use another common description – wraps about both like skin, when considered haptically this tissue is not veiling and thereby pointing to a deeper profundity.<sup>3</sup> It is not, for example, drawing attention to a building’s structural logic or an object’s significance.<sup>4</sup> Rather, this membrane, that from a distance looks peelable, is inviting of a caress, from a seeing hand: a fingering eye. So complex and multifaceted is its composition, that it needs to be seen up close; and when it is engaged thus, it is seen more haptically than optically. As described by Dominique Clévenot in his treatment of Islamic ornament (here, stuccowork):

[It] seems to invite the spectator to draw close to the sculpted surface in order to appreciate the finest elements. [This] act of drawing closer corresponds to a passage from visual to tactile values, as if the pleasure experienced in contemplating this sort of ornamentation had to find its fulfilment in the act of touching.<sup>5</sup>

This is haptic vision: a concept first introduced to art history by Alois Riegel, and significantly adapted by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.<sup>6</sup> In this adapted form, it has been intensively deployed in Islamic art history by Laura Marks, most prominently in her book, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*.

In her book, Marks argues that non-figurative, or abstract, ornamental works of Islamic art “invite a haptic look – one that moves along their surface and discovers momentary ways to make sense of them. [The] active engagement of the beholder is the subject of the work.”<sup>7</sup> For Marks, Islamic ornament is thus performative, its vector (viz., its power of signification that propels a sign to have meaning<sup>8</sup>) “though supposedly coming from the divine to the human, is nonetheless activated by the human receiver.”<sup>9</sup> This performativity is latent in the work until activated by the beholder, who “unfolds” it with their haptic gaze.<sup>10</sup> The unfolding occurs across the work’s surface, or skin, which is: 1) not a window into depth, as in Renaissance painting, but opaque;<sup>11</sup> and 2) the expression of a legible level of enfolded information, or code, that is ultimately an index of the Quran’s heavenly prototype, the *Umm al-Kitāb*.<sup>12</sup> Unfolding renders

this information perceptible. The process of enfoldment and unfolding gives Marks' theory of Islamic ornamental aesthetics its name.

Although Marks argues that her theory is related to the thought of certain medieval Muslim theologians and, especially, philosophers, as with any theory that would claim general historical validity because sharing in the ideas of a few specific and uncommon individuals, her selective argument is not persuasive. That does not mean, however, that the enfolding-unfolding aesthetics she proposes is dismissible; but it might mean that it has no historical value and little cultural reach, in spite of the culturally and historically specific chapter titles she uses to elaborate the theory.

What widespread, popularly digested historical Islamic sources might justify Marks's otherwise purely subjective decision to consider Islamic ornament more haptically than optically? The Iranian architect, Yahya Islami, has, for instance, recently argued for a haptic engagement with architecture, terming his provocative, Deleuze and Guattari-derived, depth-defying theory, "surficial thought."<sup>13</sup> Even so, historical evidence is required to answer the question; not another theory.

In terms of textual sources, the question will be answered in the second part of this essay, when the configuration of sight in Islamic culture is addressed. In terms of non-textual sources, one can point to the environment in which so much of Islamic culture was produced, the Islamic city. That is because this geographically widespread and historically perduring environment is better analysed via an embodied, haptic vision, which, like Islamic ornament, the environment invites; not a disembodied, optical vision, which the environment does not.<sup>14</sup> To that environment this essay now turns.

### *The Islamic city*

To invoke the Islamic city as a category of analysis is to wade into deep waters, so historically varied, morphologically multiform, and academically contested is it.<sup>15</sup> Without wishing to minimise the problems inherent to the category, I risk them to speak of one aspect of the Islamic city that does have a basis in fact, not ideology, at least for a certain period of history. That aspect is the anfractuous network of streets that is so typical of so much Islamic urbanism from at least the late-medieval period until at least the advent of modernity, most especially in the residential neighbourhoods. As noted by one of the most trenchant critics of the concept of the

Islamic city, this network forms part of an “identity of [urban] organization that is definitely present from Marrakesh to Herat.”<sup>16</sup>

More than sinuousness defines this network but, especially, irregularity and an abundance of gated alleys and cul-de-sacs. Together, these features render the streetscape resistant to visual legibility and thus also resistant to what Ian Campbell terms the “abstract mapping gaze” of the modern subject: the European or European-born visitor, for example.<sup>17</sup> In the time of European colonialism, this illegibility led to the phenomenon of Europeans exiting the network in order to see, describe, and/or photograph the network, a phenomenon Timothy Mitchell terms the modern subject’s desire for “the point of view.”<sup>18</sup> For example, in Roger Le Tourneau’s attempt to see and describe the old city of Fez for his audience back in France, the settler schoolmaster first tells the reader that were they simply to walk into this medina they would be plunged into incomprehension, so twisting, dense, and all but devoid of free space is it. Instead, he suggests they figuratively follow him outside the city walls, to a hillside cemetery overlooking the medina. There, among the dead, they will find their point of view.<sup>19</sup> There, too, he commences his verbal map of the medina, what he terms optically his “portrait” of Fez.<sup>20</sup>

The illegibility of the streetscape is not just a subjective perception with no basis in empirical, architectonic reality: it is not an experience peculiar to the modern subject only.<sup>21</sup> It is, rather, the appropriate affective response to what is, perhaps, the defining feature of the network: its destabilisation of (optical) vision.<sup>22</sup> I have written elsewhere on this effect, at least with regard to the streetscape of Moroccan medinas, illustrating it photographically and describing it as the illusion of perpetual transit, of arrival deferred.<sup>23</sup> I have additionally spoken of how this effect was institutionalised to suggest the existence of another world just beyond the visible horizon.<sup>24</sup> More recently, the Iranian architect and urbanist, Somaiyeh Falahat, has explored the effect with regard to the streetscape of premodern Isfahan, terming the architectural space that prompts the effect variously as *hazar-tu* (one thousand within), *tu-dar-tu* (within inside within), and *la-bar-la* (fold upon fold).<sup>25</sup> All three of these terms reference indigenous Iranian concepts; and although each is spatial, none is architecture specific. The first term can be securely dated to the nineteenth century;<sup>26</sup> the second and third, to at least the medieval period.<sup>27</sup> In a phenomenological description of a walk through both public and residential zones of the city, Falahat details the optical effect of this space. Excerpted below is a section of this description as it pertains to a neighbourhood; the description differs little from the description of the bazaar and adjacent mosque:

What happens in the space of the alley with its special curves is in fact a challenge of discovery, and with each opening of a new view/way this challenge is recommenced. With the passing of the last curve and the opening of the last view, the fall of shadows decree that there must be another way branching from the alley. Arriving at this point, a narrower blind alley can be seen, onto which the doors of some of the houses open. [...] This hiding and not directly displaying, suspending access to a goal, opening layers within each other, makes the space obscure and strange for a non-native [...]. Such a visitor cannot communicate with and understand this space, so comes to feel as if lost.<sup>28</sup>

As has also been noted by others, the type of streetscape that I have been discussing is ill comprehended optically.<sup>29</sup> It is disorienting. The disorientation that it effects allows me propose the following: that this type of streetscape belongs to Deleuze and Guattari's definition of smooth, or haptic space. The evidence for this proposal follows below.

### *Smooth space*

Attempting to rethink space as a complex defined by the historically varying interplay of nomadic and sedentary forces, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the concept of "the smooth and the striated."<sup>30</sup> To each half of the concept pertains a type of space: to the smooth pertains haptic space; to the striated, optical space. Optical space is defined by the requirements of long-distance vision and a constancy of orientation; haptic space, by the requirements of close-range vision and a ceaseless inconstancy of orientation, that is to say, a constant disorientation.<sup>31</sup> Regarding haptic space in specific, Deleuze and Guattari add:

[I]t operates step by step. Examples are the desert, steppe, ice, and sea [...]. [O]ne never sees from a distance in a space of this kind, nor does one see it from a distance; one is never "in front of," any more than one is "in" (one is "on" ...). [T]he eye itself has a haptic, non-optical function: no line separates earth from sky, which are of the same substance; there is neither horizon nor background nor perspective nor limit nor outline or form nor center; there is no intermediary distance, or all distance is intermediary.<sup>32</sup>

Although Ian Campbell correctly notes that the etymological root of the Arabic word for labyrinth (*matāha*), *tīh*, denotes a trackless, signless space that is anything but labyrinthine because devoid of all paths, in the light of Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of haptic space, the labyrinthine Islamic streetscape discussed above is well named by this Arabic root.<sup>33</sup> Striated it might appear on paper when the paths comprising it are mapped out; smooth it in fact is. Similar to the Quran's description of the fate of the Israelites, left to "wander the earth's signless space" (*yatīhūna fī al-ard*) (Q 5:26) for forty years, in this urban *tīh* one can wander lost.

This urban environment is smooth, too, in its lack of distinction between public and private. Although this assertion is contrary to the widespread view that Islamic cities make a virtue of this distinction, with the public, predominantly male, trading zones and central religious zone apparently being distinct from the semi-private and private, predominantly family-only vicinal zones,<sup>34</sup> in a greatly insightful analysis, Timothy Mitchell explains how the situation is not quite so straightforward. His analysis repays citing in full:

André Raymond's work on the great Arab cities of the eighteenth century stresses the distinction between the public world of the mosques and markets on the main thoroughfares, and the private world enclosed around the courtyards of the houses, which opened not on to the street but on to blind alleyways whose gates to the street were always closed at night. In Ottoman Cairo, these impasses leading to courtyards are said to have formed almost half the total length of the city's streets. [...] But [this] distinction between the public exterior and the domestic enclosure was not some fixed boundary. The market streets were lines of penetration from outside the city, where external routes extended into the urban interior. They too formed only a "hollow enclosure" like the courtyard, as Roberto Berardi has written, stretched out in linear form to contain the visiting stranger. They too had gates, separating the city into quarters. [...] The city, writes Berardi, is "a network made up of enclosures, of prohibitions and accorded rights. There is no more than a sliding between its moment of permission and its moment of prohibition. It is in fact this sliding between degrees of opening and accessibility, of

closure and exclusion, that seems to be lived out in everyday practice.”  
*Rather than a fixed boundary dividing the city into two parts, public and private, outside and inside, there are degrees of accessibility and exclusion determined variously by the relations between the persons involved, and by the time and the circumstance.*<sup>35</sup>

On Mitchell’s rereading of this premodern period of Islamic urbanism – the same period that I have been discussing – the city’s space is defined by fluidity, not rigidity; by smoothness, not striation. Its zones of exclusion and accessibility are defined and redefined as if by sliding screens; not static boundaries.

### *Fold upon fold*

For all that this period of the Islamic city is noticeable for its high-sided, commonly blind, contiguous walls that define its particular streetscape and thus prompt the adjective, labyrinthine, in daily life these walls have an almost two-dimensional, purely planar quality.<sup>36</sup> Because the zones of exclusion and accessibility that they define expand and contract relative to time, person, and circumstance, exactly as per Mitchell’s analysis, the walls are better understood as just so many slipping surfaces. That these walls seem to slide over each other is the optical experience of the person walking in the city, exactly as per Falahat’s description of Isfahan.<sup>37</sup> That they enclose no innermost core, no journey’s end, is *pace* Falahat the reality of the labyrinth:

The labyrinth always has two centers: where one is and where one desires to be. [...] To emerge from the labyrinth is equivalent to entering a new labyrinth. The labyrinth itself is the place of its own passage.<sup>38</sup>

In this labyrinthine reality, when the pedestrian reaches the Friday mosque, for example, their spiritual journey resumes. When they arrive at their house, in the courtyard’s well of sky, the cosmos addresses them.<sup>39</sup>

Although the image of the city as an origami construction is flawed, in that its walls are pierced for the pedestrian’s passage across them, the city’s superficiality is well caught by the image. This is especially true when one considers that the contiguity of these walls creates the illusion of a city made, like an origami item, from just one sheet of material: one wall, repeatedly

folded.<sup>40</sup> Through these folds the pedestrian passes; and because exteriority and interiority are effects of these folds, interiority being folded exteriority, the pedestrian remains all the while on their surface, never going deeper. The appropriateness of Falahat's third indigenous Iranian term for this type of convoluted space, *la-bar-la*, could scarcely be clearer: fold upon fold.

## Configuring Vision

*The forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present.*

Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844

In the foregoing section of this essay, I have attempted to show how the environment that produced so much of Islamic material culture, the Islamic urban environment, is reasonably understood as a site of surficiality, to employ the neologism of the aforementioned Yahya Islami, at least with regard to the late medieval and premodern periods. If, as Laura Marks has argued, Islamic ornament should be viewed more haptically than optically because pertaining to an enfolding-unfolding aesthetics, then this urban environment would seem to be cut from a similar aesthetic cloth. As such, it adds contextual weight to Marks's argument. In the present section of the essay, I shall argue that normatively configured vision in Islamic societies is also more haptic than optical, in that Islamic law encourages a type of interpersonal look that glances upon, but does not stare at, its object.

Inevitably, this argument can be little more than glancing itself, given the space constraints of the essay, not to mention the sheer volume of primary sources one would need to cover to provide an historically nuanced account of looking. Even so, because of the relative paucity of systematic, explicit scholarly engagement with the Islamic sensorium, one must court the risk of ahistorical over-simplification, even if only to point to some of the secondary literature that exists already on the subject.

### *Glance not gaze*

In a sound hadith, the Prophet is alleged to have said: "If a man looks (*aṭla 'a*) at you without permission, and [in response] you throw a stone at him and knock his eye out, there is no sin in this."<sup>41</sup> Although Islamic culture is not unique in condemning staring, the vehemence that its

foundational texts unleash against those who do stare is marked, as shown by this and related prophetic hadiths.<sup>42</sup> This degree of dislike perhaps explains why, in the time of European colonialism, when Muslims had more extensive contact with people who did apparently stare, some recorded their surprise. “One of the characteristics of the French is to look inquisitively (*taṭallu*’) and get excited at everything new,” commented an Egyptian Imam who lived in Paris from 1826 to 1831.<sup>43</sup> Another Muslim visitor to Europe commented: “Regardless of the winter and the snow, both men and women came in carriages, on horseback, and on foot, to look at us and contemplate us.”<sup>44</sup>

Very possibly the ethics of looking do not apply when the person stared at is from another culture and society, such that one can set no store by this last comment. What one can set store by are the Islamic texts that indicate the appropriate manner of looking when before that which the eye wants to see more. Of course, there is presumably a distinction between looking at another person and looking at material culture; but if looking is normatively habituated in a particular way by way of societal injunctions, one might suppose this habituation would obtain even in cases of looking at things not people, at least in the first instance. The act of recognition is common to be both types of looking: both person and material culture must first be recognised for what they are: person or ornament, say. Thereafter, scrutiny of the ornament may or may not occur, just as staring at the person may or may not occur (and because of the societal injunctions, most probably will not). This act of recognition is an habitual affair, as noted by the great Muslim scholar of vision, Ibn al-Haytham (d. ca. 1040), known in medieval Europe as Alhazen.<sup>45</sup>

### *A game of glances*

Addressing his cousin, the Prophet is alleged to have said: “Do not follow one look (*naẓra*) with another look; for the first is for you, but the last is not for you.”<sup>46</sup> In this canonic hadith, a playful game, or “ludics” of the glance might be said to be initiated. Looking and then immediately looking away, is positive: a pleasure. Such is the play of the glance. Looking and then immediately looking again, is negative: a sin.<sup>47</sup> Such is the iniquity of the gaze. The biblical story of the eventually punished David and the ogled Bathsheba, not recounted in the Quran, might even be said to provide divine legitimacy to this game, for as the jurist, Muḥammad al-Shawkānī (d. 1834), explains:

David did not intend looking at [Bathsheba] (*lam yata 'mmad al-nazar*); however, he then looked at her a second time. The first look counted for him, the second against him.<sup>48</sup>

In an important contribution to the habituation of normative vision in the Islamic world, Ze'ev Maghen notes: “Muslims must learn to tear their eyes away instantly from anything that, or anyone who, may divert them from the straight path.”<sup>49</sup> That is correct. However, as the two previous quotes spell out, firstly looking at that something or someone is absolutely licit; the Prophet himself had acted no differently with Zaynab, the famously beautiful wife of his adopted son, Zayd. One day, when standing outside their house, the Prophet had unintentionally seen Zaynab in a state of near undress; the glimpse left him simultaneously flustered and overcome with desire, and he immediately departed; a divorce and a short while later he had married her. As this story is related in the more contemporary language of the Muslim historiographer, al-Ṭabari (d. 923):

The Messenger of God came to the house of Zayd [...] so as to ask, “Where is Zayd?” [...] Zaynab bt. Jahsh, Zayd’s wife, rose to meet him. Because she was dressed only in a shift, the Messenger of God turned away from her. She said: “He is not here, Messenger of God. Come in, you who are as dear to me as my father and mother!” The Messenger of God refused to enter. Zaynab had dressed in haste when she was told “the Messenger of God is at the door.” She had jumped up in haste and excited the admiration of the Messenger of God, so that he turned away murmuring something that could scarcely be understood. However, he did say overtly: “Glory be to God the Almighty! Glory be to God, who causes hearts to turn!” [...] After that day, Zayd could find no possible way to [approach Zaynab]. [...] He separated from her and left her, and she became free [to marry the Prophet].<sup>50</sup>

The first look was for the Prophet: he looked and immediately looked away. That is to say, he glanced and took licit pleasure. Thereafter followed prolonged licit pleasure with the object of this look: marriage.

*Seeing through*

“From God nothing is hidden,” asserts the Quran, adding, “God sees the things you do.”<sup>51</sup> The assertion is replicated in one of God’s quranic names, *al-Baṣīr*: the Seer or All-Seeing. God stares; and before this stare all becomes transparent. If, as the preceding paragraphs have argued, staring is disavowed for Muslims in the here and now, the situation is reversed in the hereafter; for in Paradise, Muslims may stare to their hearts’ content. Similar to God’s stare, much of what they stare at there falls pellucid before their eyes: the thigh marrow of each man’s seventy-two consorts, notwithstanding the seventy dresses that each consort wears; the obverse panels of gates and the interiors of rooms, notwithstanding the viewer’s opposite location to both; the white hairs in the black beards of men, notwithstanding the thousand-year distance between subject and object, viewer and beard; and the faces of the prophets and other religious exemplars who inhabit castles so distant they are “like stars on the horizon.”<sup>52</sup>

Back on earth, this kind of penetrative vision is attributed only to rulers and the most spiritually advanced. Concerning the latter group, which predominantly comprises Sufis, the most succinct evidence for this claim is a sound hadith that “forms the basis of an elaborate structure of mystical theosophy in the writings of the [...] Sufis.”<sup>53</sup> The hadith reads as follows:

The Prophet said: “God said, ‘[...] My servant continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory works until I love him. And when I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, *his seeing with which he sees*, his hand with which he strikes, and his leg with which he walks. [...]’”<sup>54</sup>

Concerning rulers, as God’s shadow on earth, it would be little surprising to find them attributed with omniscient vision in courtly panegyrics.<sup>55</sup> In the absence of such textual evidence known to me, the evidence I shall present comes from Islamic palatine architecture. It indicates a desire on the part of the patron to symbolise tectonically their penetrative, all-seeing gaze over their kingdom.

### *Miradors*

The miradors, or viewing points, of early to late-medieval Muslim palaces comprised not just pavilions of the type for which the Alhambra is justly famous, but, inter alia, also throne-rooms.<sup>56</sup> The so-called Salón Rico of the tenth-century palace, Madinat al-Zahra’, just outside of Cordoba, is a good example of such a throne-room designed with a specific view in mind. As the recent publication of Felix Arnold has shown with precision, from the back of this

throne-room, where the ruler would have sat, a mathematically calibrated view opened up: first over the throne-room itself, and then, via the open arches of the entrance façade, through and out over the garden beyond.<sup>57</sup>

Of such meticulously framed, sovereign views as this, D. Fairchild Ruggles writes:

The mirador, as the origin of seeing, represents the subject/viewer – the king – and the view that is proffered is seen through his perspective, emphasizing by its breadth and its limits the extent of his lordship over the seen landscape, his domain. [...] The positioning of the patron as the earthly counterpart of God, the ultimate creator according to the Qur'ān, seems blasphemous, but we already know that [Muslim rulers] approached the brink of acceptability on many other occasions, even crossing it [...].<sup>58</sup>

To emphasise the otherness of this type of view, Ruggles adds:

The opening up of space to allow long sight lines and sweeping views was more dramatic in the medieval Islamic context than a modern reader might initially realize. In the medieval environment, walls, doors, screens, and veils curtailed vision at every pass. Houses were not to be seen, except in a controlled manner by selected individuals and at select time; bodies were not to be seen, again except for a few individuals under controlled circumstances; and even in the supposedly public spaces of the city [...] there were few occasions when long-range views encompassing large spaces and many people were possible. [...] Vision was a tightly controlled experience; it had social power and as such was not available to more than a small group of people [...].<sup>59</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In this essay I have argued that in Islamic culture, architecture and vision extol the virtues of the surface. The ornament draping buildings celebrate it, texturing and colouring it, whilst simultaneously inviting viewers to come in close, as if to caress it with their eyes. Vision is

normatively habituated to look superficially, not penetratively: to look more haptically than optically. This disciplined vision caresses more than ornament. Over everything it glances in ludic play.

If these conclusions are to have any significance in archaeology, the student of Islamic archaeology must relinquish whatever vestiges remain of their uncritical trust in the traditionally inscrutable, depth-seeking gaze of scholarship. Unless, of course, they would be sovereign! If these conclusions are to have any traction in the study of Islamic material culture more generally, they must be taken for what they are: initial clearings in a vast arena, inviting of further consideration. Such further consideration might include a discussion of staring in terms of the evil eye (*al-‘ayn*) and extramission, or the theory of vision to which belief in the evil eye is related; and a discussion of superficiality in terms of the greatly influential quranic hermeneutic binary, *ẓāhir/bāṭin* (surface/depth).

---

<sup>1</sup>. As will be apparent from this introduction, the following essay pertains to the sense of sight, and distantly to touch. This focus is not to deny the importance of the other senses, most especially sound and smell, which, as anyone who has walked through a medina will testify, are extensively stimulated there. Although this extensive stimulation is poorly reflected in the literature, for important contributions see Justin McGuinness, “Neighbourhood Notes: Texture and Streetscape in the Medina of Tunis,” *The Journal of North African Studies*, 5: 4 (2000): 97-120; and Chiraz Chtara et al., “La mémoire ambiante de l’espace sonore des Souks de la médina de Tunis à travers les textes du XIXe siècle: tentative de rétrospective ambiante,” in *Ambiances, Tomorrow: Proceedings of 3rd International Congress on Ambiances, September 2016, Volos, Greece*, ed. Nicolas Rémy and Nicolas Tixier, 2 vols. (Volos: University of Thessaly, 2016), 2: 885-90.

<sup>2</sup>. Oleg Grabar memorably compares the extensiveness of ornament in Islamic art to “a superb sheath of propriety [cast] over strife, passion and the visible world.” Idem, “An Art of the Object,” in idem, *Islamic Art and Beyond. Vol. 3: Constructing the Study of Islamic Art* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 13-29 @16. For drape, mantle and other textile-related covering terms, including references to their usage in Islamic sources, see, inter alia, Lisa Golombek, “The Function of Decoration in Islamic Architecture,” in *Theories and*

---

*Principles of Design in the Architecture of Islamic Societies*, ed. Margaret Bentley Sevckenko (Cambridge, Mass.: Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, 1988), 35-45.

<sup>3</sup>. See, inter alia, Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (1973), 200-1; and Dalu Jones, “The Elements of Decoration: Surface Pattern and Light,” in *Architecture of the Islamic World: Its History and Social Meaning*, ed. George Michell (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 144-75, here at p. 161.

<sup>4</sup>. Cf. “In Western architecture, ornamentation tries to bring out the organic character of the construction by emphasizing the places where forces are exerted – capitals, keystones, pilasters, cornices, etc. [...]. However, Islamic architectural ornamentation tends to blur the frontiers between the structural and the non-structural. As a result the building seems to ignore the laws of gravity [...]” Dominique Clévenot, *Splendors of Islam: Architecture, Decoration and Design*, trans. Jean Davis (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 193.

<sup>5</sup>. *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>6</sup>. Margaret Iversen, *Alois Riegel: Art History and Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 9-10; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 479ff.

<sup>7</sup>. Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010), 63.

<sup>8</sup>. *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>9</sup>. *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>10</sup>. *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>. *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>12</sup>. *Ibid.*, 174; 8-10.

<sup>13</sup>. S. Yahya Islami, “What is Surficial Thought in Architecture?,” *Architectural Research Quarterly* 28: 1 (2014): 39-46.

<sup>14</sup>. On the disembodied, purely optical vision traditional to the modern scientific subject, see, inter alia, Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 81-2; and Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 3-24.

<sup>15</sup>. For a readily accessible overview of some of the issues at stake in invoking the concept, see Simon O’Meara, “Labyrinth: Moroccan Medinas,” in *The Middle East Institute’s Viewpoints. Special Edition: Architecture and Urbanism in the Middle East*, ed. John Calabrese (2008): 7-10, available at <http://tinyurl.com/llpgc2p> (last accessed 13.04.2017).

---

<sup>16</sup>. André Raymond, “Islamic City, Arab City: Orientalist Myths and Recent Views,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 21: 1 (1994): 3-18, here p. 17, in addition to idem, “The Spatial Organization of the City,” in *The City in the Islamic World*, ed. Salma Jayyusi et al., 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 1: 47-70, here at p. 63.

<sup>17</sup>. Ian Campbell, *Labyrinths, Intellectuals and the Revolution: The Arabic-Language Moroccan Novel, 1957–72* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 48-68. This subject’s experience of the network is analysed to good effect in Réda Bensmaïa, *Experimental Nations, or, The Invention of the Maghreb*, trans. Alyson Waters (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 27-37. Bensmaïa encapsulates their experience of illegibility as follows: “To stroll through the old city, to lose oneself in it, is to find oneself constantly face to face with a multitude of signs [...]” *Ibid.*, 33. Later in this essay I shall invert Bensmaïa’s multitude of signs to its opposite, an absence of signs. Both effect illegibility.

<sup>18</sup>. Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 23-33.

<sup>19</sup>. Roger Le Tourneau, *Fès avant le protectorat: étude économique et sociale d’une ville de l’Occident musulman* (Casablanca: Société Marocaine de Librairie et d’Édition, 1949), 109-11.

<sup>20</sup>. *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>. This does not mean that we should expect to find indigenous accounts reflecting on this relative illegibility. Although such accounts do exist for the modern period (see, e.g., Campbell, *Labyrinths*, 52-3), their absence for earlier periods does not invalidate the claim being made here, no more than an absence of historical European accounts reflecting on the progressively pronounced legibility of late-medieval and later European cities would invalidate the historical, architectural fact that European cities were increasingly organised about the eye from the late-medieval period onwards. (See, e.g., Marvin Trachtenberg, *The Dominion of the Eye: Urbanism, Art, and Power in Early Modern Florence* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997]. I imagine, but do not know, that such historical European accounts exist; hence my use of the modal verb, would.) Additionally, just as nineteenth- and twentieth-century European visitors to Islamic cities struggled to render these places legible and searched for “the point of view,” so contemporary Muslim visitors to European cities were dazzled by these cities’ extreme legibility. One of these visitors referred to this drive for legibility in modern European cities as “*intizam al-manzar*, the organisation of the view.” Mitchell, *Colonising*, 12.

<sup>22</sup>. Cf. “How often we read that the stranger feels lost in the unnumbered and unnamed streets and passages that turn and twist in an apparent contradiction of organization and orientation. One’s whole sense of direction is suddenly, perhaps frighteningly, completely irrelevant.”

---

Michael Gilson, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990), 196.

<sup>23</sup>. O'Meara, "Labyrinth," 10.

<sup>24</sup>. Idem, *Space and Muslim Urban Life: At the Limits of the Labyrinth of Fez* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 2.

<sup>25</sup>. Somaiyeh Falahat, *Re-imagining the City: A New Conceptualisation of the Urban Logic of the "Islamic City"* (Berlin: Springer Vieweg, 2014), 194, w.r.t. the first two terms. W.r.t the third term: eadem, private communication (24.03.2017).

<sup>26</sup>. Eadem, *Re-imagining*, 194 n. 5.

<sup>27</sup>. Eadem, private communication (24.03.2017).

<sup>28</sup>. Eadem, *Re-imagining*, 175-80.

<sup>29</sup>. Cf., e.g., Campbell, *Labyrinth*, 48-52; and most recently, Rachid Lehdahda, *Le corps et l'espace dans Les voix de Marrakech d'Ellias Canetti, Makbara de Juan Goytisolo et Marrakch medine de Claude Ollier* (Paris: Éditions Connaissances et Savoirs, 2016), esp. 195ff.

<sup>30</sup>. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 474ff.

<sup>31</sup>. Ibid., 492-4.

<sup>32</sup>. Ibid., 492-3.

<sup>33</sup>. Campbell, *Labyrinths*, 49. Regarding the signless quality of this streetscape, Gilson observes: "The actual social logic of [this streetscape's] relations and forms escapes the outsider. It is confusing, a jumble of incomprehensible messages, a noise [...]." Idem, *Recognizing*, 196.

<sup>34</sup>. See, e.g., André Raymond, "Espaces publics et espaces privés dans les villes arabes traditionnelles," *Maghreb-Machrek* 123 (1989): 194-201.

<sup>35</sup>. Mitchell, *Colonising*, 55-6 (my emphasis). The final sentence of the embedded translated quote by Roberto Berardi has been modified in accordance with the original French: "Et, toutefois, c'est bien ce glissement entre degrés d'ouverture et d'accessibilité, de fermeture et d'exclusion qui semble être vécu dans la pratique quotidienne." Roberto Berardi, "Espace et ville en pays d'Islam," in *L'espace social de la ville arabe*, ed. Dominique Chevallier (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1979), 99-123, here at p. 105.

<sup>36</sup>. In a different context, Oleg Grabar remarks upon a similar optical illusion concerning otherwise solid walls. Referring to the monumental architecture of Safavid Isfahan, he writes: "if one looks for instance at a section of the Masjed-e Shah or of the Ali Qapu, one can hardly avoid the feeling of an architecture of theatrical flats which could be shifted around almost at

will and whose surfaces could be redone at any time with little effort and without affecting the building.” Idem, “Isfahan as a Mirror of Persian Architecture,” in idem, *Islamic Visual Culture, 1100-1800. Vol. 2: Constructing the Study of Islamic Art* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2006), 277-304, here at p. 295.

<sup>37</sup>. As noted by Clévenot, the representation of buildings in Persian miniatures, seemingly floating in space as if just theatre flats with neither mass nor depth, commonly reproduces the basis for this effect, namely, the derealisation of architecture. See Clévenot, *Splendors*, 193; and esp. idem, “L’ornementation architecturale persane: une esthétique de la transfiguration,” in *Espaces transfigurés: à partir de l’œuvre de Georges Rousse*, ed. idem and Christine Buignet (Pau: Presses Universitaires de Pau, 2007), 119-132, here at pp. 124-5.

<sup>38</sup>. Philippe Borgeaud, “The Open Entrance to the Closed Palace of the King: The Greek Labyrinth in Context,” *History of Religions* 14: 1 (1974): 1-27, here at p. 23.

<sup>39</sup>. Cf. “On the one hand, the house is closed in on itself; on the other, it is ever open to the Infinite.” Titus Burckhardt, *Fez: City of Islam*, trans. William Stoddart (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1992), 105.

<sup>40</sup>. On the walls’ contiguity, see O’Meara, *Space*, 15-16.

<sup>41</sup>. Abū ‘Abd Allāh b. Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Ibn Bāz, 8 vols. in 5 bdgs. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr 1994), 8: 57 (kitāb al-diyāt, bāb 23, no. 6902).

<sup>42</sup>. E.g. “Whoever looks into a house without permission, [the occupants may] gouge and blind in the eye.” Sulaymān b. al-Ash‘ath Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, ed. ‘Izzat ‘Ubayd al-Da‘ās, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1997), 5: 230 (kitāb al-adab, bāb fī istidh’ān, bāb 136, no. 5172).

<sup>43</sup>. Rifā‘a Rāfi‘ al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (d. 1873), *al-A‘māl al-kāmila li-Rifā‘a Rāfi‘ al-Ṭaḥṭāwī*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Imāra, 5 vols. (Beirut: al-Mu‘assasa al-‘Arabīyya li-l-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr, 1973-81), 2: 76. For additional records of surprise, including this one, see Mitchell, *Colonising*, 2-4.

<sup>44</sup>. Ahmed Azmi Efendi (d. 1821), as cited in Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), 299.

<sup>45</sup>. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan Ibn al-Haytham, *The Optics of Ibn al-Haytham: Books I-III, On Direct Vision*, trans. with intro. and commentary by A.I. Sabra, 2 vols. (London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1989), 1: 128-38. Cf. A.I. Sabra, “Sensation and Inference in Alhazen’s Theory of Visual Perception,” in *Studies in Perception: Interrelations in the History of Philosophy and Science*, ed. Peter K. Machamer and Robert G. Turnbull (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1978), 160-185, here at pp. 174-6.

<sup>46</sup>. Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, 2: 421 (kitāb al-nikāḥ, bāb mā yu'maru bi-hi min ghaḍḍ al-baṣar, bāb 44, no. 2149).

<sup>47</sup>. This sinfulness is brought out more clearly in a slightly different wording of the hadith, as cited in Ze'ev Maghen, "See No Evil: Morality and Methodology in Ibn al-Qaṭṭān al-Fāsi's *Aḥkām al-naẓar bi-ḥāssat al-baṣar*," *Islamic Law and Society* 14: 3 (2007): 342–90, here at p. 368.

<sup>48</sup>. Muḥammad al-Shawkānī, *Faḥḥ al-Qadīr* (Cairo, 1964), 4: 427, as cited in Maghen, "See," 367 n. 44.

<sup>49</sup>. *Ibid.*, 368

<sup>50</sup>. Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī* (Ta'riḥ al-rusul wa-al-mulūk). *Volume 8: The Victory of Islam*, trans. Michael Fishbein (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 2-3.

<sup>51</sup> Q 3:5, 14:38; and, inter alia, Q 2:233, 3:156, 49:18.

<sup>52</sup>. For citation details and further discussion, see Simon O'Meara, "Muslim Visuality and the Visibility of Paradise and the World," in *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, ed. Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 2: 545-65, here at p. 560-1.

<sup>53</sup>. A.J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London: Unwin, 1950), 27.

<sup>54</sup>. Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 7: 243-4 (kitāb al-raqā'iq, bāb 38, no. 6002) (my emphasis). For a recent discussion of some of the modalities of mystical vision, see Amira Mittermaier, *Dreams That Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 84-111.

<sup>55</sup>. The issue of the divine, semi-divine or sacrosanct nature of rulers in the Muslim world throughout history is beyond the scope of this essay. For a primer, see Aziz al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian, and Pagan Politics* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997).

<sup>56</sup>. D. Fairchild Ruggles, "The Mirador in Abbasid and Hispano-Umayyad Garden Typology," *Muqarnas* 7 (1990): 73-82, here at p. 75; eadem, D. Fairchild Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscape, and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 106-7.

<sup>57</sup>. Felix Arnold, *Islamic Palace Architecture in the Western Mediterranean: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 83-93.

<sup>58</sup>. Ruggles, *Gardens*, 107.

<sup>59</sup>. *Ibid.*